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ABSTRACT

Writing teachers need to recognize the special circumstances of culturally displaced students. A specific category of such students are those from the Asian subcontinent, who are not exactly non-native speakers of English, but who do speak non-standard American English. These students occupy a subaltern (marginal) position: they can neither be identified with native nor with non-native speakers. The "in-between" spaces of language ability of these subaltern students occur because they have access to three distinct and disparate idioms of the English language--prescriptive British English, native idiomatic spoken English, and standard American English. The different idioms of English cause three levels of confusion for the students: (1) the need to choose between using the familiar passive voice and the alien, assertive, active voice used in the American style; (2) confusions regarding their self and self-identity, as their conception of the interiority of the self is different from the Western-Anglo concept; and (3) rampant confusion regarding language usage creating a disorientation and alienation peculiar to their situation. Strategies for teaching subaltern students must acknowledge cultural boundaries as thresholds that must be crossed, erased, and translated in the course of cultural production and meaningful discourse. While some suggest grouping speakers of non-standard English with the non-native speakers (both are learning to write academic English), others argue against working towards the mastery of some particular, well-defined sort of discourse. The latter advocate encouraging an awareness of and pleasure in the various competing student discourses. (PRA)

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'Cultural Displacement' is a phenomenon insistently making its presence felt with the shrinking of boundaries between nations. Its effects have percolated down into educational institutions in the guise of students who come from from all over the globe into the tiny construct of our writing classes. Speaking as a culturally displaced member of the academic community myself, my paper is concerned with a specific category of culturally displaced 'non-native' speaking students of English: namely students who come from the Asian sub-continent. These include the countries that belong to the peninsular region below the Himalayas. My categorisation runs into trouble right away because these students are not exactly non-native speakers of English but non-native speakers of American English. They come to writing classes with a reasonable fluency in the English language already.

The most prominent characteristic of this group of students is that they do not fit into the already existing categories that we as teachers use to differentiate between

and identify students with disparate language abilities for pedagogical purposes. They are not exactly non-native speakers of English, they certainly speak non-standard American English and they occupy the marginal position in the construct of standard American students; that is, on the boundaries alongside non-native speakers.

The best term that I can think of for them is the 'subaltern' that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her book In Other Worlds uses to identify those who are marginalised. The subaltern is on the boundaries of the western eurocentric circle, it is the 'other'. These students occupy a marginal position with both groups; the native as well as the non-native speakers, therefore, they cannot be identified with either group. This produces the a unique effect of non-identity, what Homi Bhabha in his article 'Narrating the Nation' describes as:

What emerges as an effect of such 'incomplete signification' is a turning of boundaries and limits into the 'in-between' spaces through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated. (Nation and Narration 3)

Thus, what I am articulating here is that there is a need for us as teachers of writing to be cognisant of these 'in-between' spaces of language ability that the subaltern students occupy. The subaltern position is actually

applicable to all students who come from neocolonised or postcolonial societies. These students are for the most part bilingual; they possess the ability to articulate in their own native language and the language of the influential nation, be it English, French, Dutch or German. However, for the purposes of this paper, I will concentrate on students who have a prior acquaintance with English.

To elaborate what I mean by the term 'in-between' spaces of language ability or interlanguage of these students is that they have access to three distinct and disparate idioms of the English language. Firstly, they are taught prescriptive British English in high school (an impact of the two hundred years of colonisation of the sub-continent). The prescriptive language that they learn in school is intermingled with the native idiomatic spoken English of their own countries. When they reach the United States, they are confronted with standard American English. Thus, they have three distinctly different idioms of language to contend with.

Consider the various levels of confusion that occur, firstly, these students are already marginal and have the same misconceptions as the non-native speakers in writing classes. Following this misconception, two issues arise—one, when writing the focused formal papers, do these students use the formal American English that is stylistically assertive;

which Fan Shen in his article on culture and identity calls the "I" and "self" of Western individualism. This is a particularly American style in the tradition of Walt Whitman. On the other hand, do they use the prescriptive post-colonial English taught in their native countries?, one effect of which Dennis E. Baron characterises as a passivization of the students' language; the tendency to use the passive voice and the indirect question in dealing with instructors. A result of this conflict: Problem one--The necessity to make a choice between using the passive familiar voice versus the alien, assertive, active voice in the formal papers oriented towards an audience of instructors.

The subaltern student has to deal with the authority of the dominant discourse of the standard American English and the English he or she already possesses. This creates a tension between the synchronic panoptical vision of domination--i.e. the demand for identity and stasis within the cultural construct that the subaltern is in now and the counter-pressure of the diachrony of the prior cultural history of the student and the change and difference that he or she has to subsequently deal with.

Secondly, these students also have confusions regarding their 'self' and 'self-identity.' Their conception of the interiority of the 'self' is different from the Western-Anglo concept. The resultant writing and language

that is produced by a desire to imitate the dominant model, emerges as a mode of representation that marginalises these students because it is inevitably inappropriate, and within which the signs of cultural priority are problematised. Thenceforth, during the freewriting assignments that we assign in our classes and that largely stem from Peter Elbow's composition theory, do they use the idiomatic commonplace English of their native countries or the casual American idiom? This gives rise to a tertiary level of confusion. I am emphasizing that confusion is rampant regarding language usage among this group of students which creates disorientation and alienation that is peculiar to their particular situation, an issue I feel, that has not been sufficiently noted before and needs to be recognized and addressed more by composition instructors.

Up until now, my paper has been devoted to a discussion that problematises the situation of the Subaltern student. I will now propose some possible ways of handling the problem and dealing with the situation from an instructor's viewpoint. These suggestions are by no means exhaustive and certainly exploratory in nature. The obvious first, a recognition of the peculiar situation of these students. As an individual, who is in the self-same subaltern position, both as a teacher and as a student, the prevalent and conventional pedagogical practises have always appeared

inadequate to me. They seemed to be targeted at educating an individual that is not quite identifiable: a result of the 'incomplete signification' that I have mentioned before.

Alice Myers Roy in her article on Alliance for Literacy argues for the teaching of non-native speakers and speakers of non-standard English together because the fields of second language acquisition and sociolinguistics supports the combining of these groups for instruction in basic writing and composition. In the writing courses, even the native speakers are under instruction to be skillful in writing a certain type of English needed for academic purposes: what linguists call the Target language. Written, educated English is a form of English almost all college students must learn. Besides nobody is perfect in the target language, a fact with which we as instructors are well acquainted. Therefore, she argues, even in terms of strategy, the two groups can be plotted on the same imaginary continuum even though the starting points are different on the graph. Their target and goal are the same.

Since the subaltern group already has adequate language skills, their target language should supposedly be the discourse used in the academic community. David Bartholomae in 'Inventing the university' writes that every time a student sits down to write for instructors he or she has to invent the university for the occasion. The student has to

learn to speak the language of the academia, to speak the way academics do. They have to try on peculiar ways of knowing and selecting, evaluating and reporting, concluding and arguing; features that define the various discourses of the academic community. The task of the student is thus imagined as one crossing the border from one kind of discourse to another, of taking on a new kind of language. It shifts the attention of educational evaluators from concentrating solely on the intelligence and competence of the student to the problem of socialisation as well. This creates a binary division, however, and Bartholomae does not offer any means of negotiating between the two.

Patricia Bizzell offers assimilation on the level of Rhetoric in her work on Foundationalism and Anti-Foundationalism. As she writes:

Mastery of academic discourse must begin with socialization to the community's ways, in the same way that one enters any cultural group. One must first go native (Foundationalism 53).

However, assimilation even at the level of rhetoric continues to posit the problem of 'incomplete signification' in my view. Rhetorical assimilation for the subaltern student implies a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline that includes a continual appropriation of a double articulation that still maintains the basic power

structure and surveillance. Dissonance created by competing discourses is inevitable and no kind of assimilation can eradicate that.

A more useful approach is offered by Joseph Harris through the idea of community in the study of writing. He argues for the notion that students should be dissuaded from working towards the mastery of some particular, well-defined sort of discourse. They should be encouraged towards a kind of Bakhtinian polyphony--what Harris terms as "an Awareness of and pleasure in the various competing discourses that make up their own. There is a need for a repositioning of students in relation to several continuous and conflicting discourses.

The above two pedagogical strategies appear to be more favourable for the subaltern student. Within this strategic construct there should be space for negotiation for the student, not only to reposition himself or herself but also to be able to change and shift this location. Cultural boundaries have to be acknowledged as thresholds that must be crossed, erased and translated in the course of cultural production and therefore any meaningful discourse. Only then, I believe, the shifting boundaries of cultural displacement can begin to be accommodated within the classroom.

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